

Instinct

by Kelli Trapnell

Mine is a hard-earned existence; clinging is my way. I have never once not trusted my talons, steel blue against the reddened cliff face where I hide my young. I watch them yellow-eyed, these tiny balls of fluff, my baby monsters. I want to tell them, as they throb alive, eyes closed in sleep against the pale gleam of the high full moon. I want to tell them not to die. To survive, even when the wind off the water makes flying a stiff, awkward battle, even when the length of their glides hardly seems to merit the effort of their scaled wings beating.

Tioooooop, tioooooop, I sing instead, and watch them push tiny blue beaks and bulbous heads deeper into the flimsy nest of sticks I worked so hard to build. *Tioooooop*, my low whistle.

I promise them pain but also beauty. I promise them rare days of travel, rare days in years to come of climbing high and higher until finally, for once, the fall is long enough to be worth the pain of climbing, a day when they will soar, the sharpened wind an unlikely friend skating slick beneath their brown-white wings. Against my better judgment, I tell them to dream of softer things, of how the breeze lifts the tiny feathers on their heads, of how the sea air tickles their beaks. They love me more for this small kindness, but I wonder at my reasons.

They coo and gurgle in the warmth of twig and down. They are so delicate, hard to look at without thinking of death. I tell them I want for them chief among all things strength, speed, resilience.

I *tioooooop* and *tioooooop*, and do my best to mask my fear. My own dreams, when I sleep, are filled with swift dark shapes that come by night, of the prehistoric bleeding truth: eat or be eaten. Soon, I know, I will have to push them out, these three fragile tufts of me. Soon, I must abandon this small peace.

Out across the wide Pacific, yellow morning breaks. The sea calls, ever-teeming with the shined blue meat of fish. I twitch my shoulders, shrug off the love I feel and step back into the slick chill of need. Survival requires movement.

I bend and leap into the lightening sky, my wings spread full and reaching. I wheel and plunge down, down, faster until I am a single drop of water on water, until I rip through the hard grey surface of the ocean and speed after my prey. I eat and absorb sound, as my mother did, and her mother before her, and her mother before her. I am a weapon; they taught me well. I do my best not to feel.

When I break into the air once more, I think of my children, of the fish in my belly, and scream against the unfairness of the ever-repeating morning. The sound scares two white gulls from a nearby rock. I scream again, longer. It is against my nature to cry.

